

# DOES THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY HAVE A FUTURE?

*Of course it does. Although that answer is convenient and perhaps reassuring, it is too short to be useful. The keynote speaker from this year's DF general meeting has a perspective. It involves thinking differently about access.*

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**D**oes the academic library have a future? Of course it does. But in its brevity and generality, that answer obscures more specific, useful, and unsettling questions, including:

- What is (and what should be) the future of the academic library *collection*?
- Does the academic *librarian* have a future, and what might it look like?
- Which of our *traditional library practices* should come into the age of networked digital information access, and which should be left behind?
- What *new skills* must librarians gain in order to remain useful?

While perfect answers to these questions are elusive, there are some things I believe it is safe to say. First: within the next decade, the days of wondering whether or not your library could give you access to the resources you need will be a dim and fading memory. Hopefully, this will be because libraries have made access so intuitive and so comprehensive that it will never occur to our patrons to wonder whether or not they have access. If we fail to do so, then others will, and the academic library itself may be a fading memory.

How can we prevent this? Hard to say. While it is easy to see many component parts of the future scholarly communication environment, how they will ultimately fall together into a pattern is very difficult to predict. I am haunted by the iPod, a device which—completely unexpectedly—destroyed the music industry. At first it seemed to be nothing more than a digital version of the Sony Walkman, a device which had invigorated that industry by enabling people to spend more time listening to music, thus fueling demand for albums and cassettes. But the iPod turned out to be much more than a digital

Walkman; it led to the collapse of the album-based music economy and a return to the song-based economy of the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. Labels cannot make nearly as much money selling songs as albums, and the resulting implosion of the music industry has been breathtaking—and should act as a warning to both libraries and publishers.

This question, therefore, keeps me awake at night: of the services, technologies, devices, and standards that are emerging in the current scholarly information marketplace, which are the iPods? What innocuous-seeming device or structural innovation is poised to change everything about the scholarly system in which we all work? Is it the iPad? New citation measures like the Eigenfactor? Open Access? Or perhaps something else that has yet to be invented—or that was invented ten years ago and has yet to demonstrate its full impact in this new environment?

We in libraries may not know the answers to all of these questions, but some things about the emerging information marketplace are increasingly clear. They include:

*The death of print as a distribution mechanism for scholarship.* Many of our traditional library practices evolved because of the difficulty of distributing, finding, and organizing printed documents. Those practices came with us into the online era. The way we manage journals; interlibrary loan; traditional cataloging; traditional bibliographic instruction—these are vestiges of a bygone, print-based information era, and are as useful and desirable as prehensile tails. Instead of preserving them, we need to obviate them. The vast majority of scholarship and learning takes place in a completely different context now, and there is no going back, nor should there be. The days when information could only be accessed by means of heavy, expensive, wasteful, and environmentally disastrous physical objects were not the Good Old Days of scholarship; they were the Dark Ages.

*The library's loss of monopoly control over access to high-quality information.* While academic libraries do continue to offer the valuable service of pooling their constituents' money and leveraging it to buy expensive information that would otherwise be too expensive for individuals, the amount of solid and reliable scholarly information that is freely and easily available to the public grows from day to day. In fact, libraries contribute to this growth by actively supporting Open Access initiatives. And so we should—but we should also prepare ourselves for the coming day when our students and faculty no longer believe they need us. Whether they are right or wrong in that belief will be immaterial; what will determine their behavior, and thus our future, is what they believe, rightly or wrongly.

*The quickly-decreasing relevance of the library collection.* The library collection is like a pond, one which we deepen every year, and which we try to convince our patrons to use by telling them (inaccurately) that it contains everything they need for their research and that they will be better off coming to it than in going to other ponds. But the reality is that they now have access to a constantly-flowing river of information, and our collections are artificially small and constrained. The idea that researchers should “start their research with the library website” makes less sense every day.

*The obviation of proxy records by the rise of full-text searching.* Catalog records were invented because in the print era, it was not possible to interrogate a document without reading it. Not only is it now possible to search the full text of born-digital ebooks and articles, it is also possible to do so with millions of printed books that have been digitized and made publicly available for that purpose. This is not to say that metadata itself has been obviated—on the contrary, good metadata is more necessary than ever. However, the traditional catalog record is a horse-drawn buggy that we continue to insist on driving on the freeway. It is time to abandon it in favor of new metadata standards made for the new information environment.

*Our patrons' growing indifference to printed books.* This indifference is spread unevenly among users and among disciplines, of course, and will be experienced differently from library to library. But all libraries need to examine their circulation trends—bearing in mind that if enrollment has increased over the years, then circulation rates will be much more instructive than raw

circulation numbers. In the major North American research libraries, circulation rates have plummeted over the past 15 years, and they show no signs of leveling out. Each library needs to know what its local trends are, and needs to allocate budgets, programming, and building space accordingly.

This all may sound like bad news for libraries, but in fact it is only bad news for those libraries that insist on pretending it is still 1990. The good news is that new models of access and library service are already emerging, and they offer significant opportunities for those libraries and librarians that are willing to take them. These are opportunities to serve our students and scholars with a level of both efficiency and effectiveness that was not possible in the print era. They include:

*Patron-driven acquisition of library materials.* Patron-driven acquisition or access (PDA) has been a popular and controversial topic over the past few years, and understandably so. It is a popular topic in part because it promises to reduce dramatically the amount of money spent in libraries on books that are never used by library patrons. It is controversial, in part, because PDA assumes that patrons know what they want—an assumption that undermines some of what librarians have traditionally considered their *raison d'être*. Certainly, PDA is not an appropriate avenue for building special collections, but it is a powerful tool for increasing the effectiveness of our general collections. It also provides intriguing opportunities for new models of access that do not require the building of permanent, just-in-case collections at all.

*Article-based access to journal content.* In recent years libraries have felt an increasing urgency about questioning the wisdom of what is colloquially called the Big Deal (by which a publisher sells online access to its entire journal collection at a very low per-unit price, as long as the library agrees to maintain permanently its previous complement of individual subscriptions). But by the same token, surely we should be questioning the Medium Deal—the journal subscription—which is simply the Big Deal at the scale of articles rather than journals. Like the Big Deal, the Medium Deal entails the purchase of unwanted content in order to secure affordable access to what is wanted. Models are emerging (though slowly and experimentally at this point) that might



make it possible for libraries to give their patrons access to only those articles that are needed, in the moment the need is realized. This, again, would undermine our traditional understanding of what it means to build a collection. But if our goal is to build a collection, then we are confusing means with ends. The purpose of a research collection is not to be a wonderful collection; it is to make research possible. If better ways than traditional collection-building emerge, then so much the better.

*Print-on-demand.* One of the wonderful things that our networked digital information environment makes possible is the production of printed documents on demand (POD). This can be done through outsourcing (through services such as Lightning Source) or in-house (by means of emerging technologies such as the Espresso Book Machine). While the equipment needed for in-house POD remains very expensive and, frankly, rather crude, I am convinced that the technology will quickly become cheaper and more refined and will soon be a major component of the bookselling landscape. If libraries fail to take advantage of the opportunities offered by POD technology, we will have no one to blame but ourselves—and more importantly, we will fail to serve our scholars as well as we should.

*Storage and management of research data.* Historically, research data has often been treated by scholars as the sawdust of their research projects—a byproduct to be swept away when the project is done, or perhaps haphazardly “archived” on physical storage devices in desk drawers. But research data sets offer potentially enormous benefits to other scholars, who can repurpose them or use them to reexamine the

original researcher’s conclusions. Libraries are uniquely well-positioned to offer curation and ongoing access to research data sets. This will require learning new skills, of course, as well as a change in our service posture—neither of which ought to be beyond our professional capabilities.

*Greatly enhanced access to rare and unique research materials.* As time goes on, the research library becomes less and less necessary as a provider of access to “commodity books”—those books that are easily and commonly available in the general marketplace. Whereas a few years ago a student or faculty member may have relied on the library for access to a classic novel or current disciplinary text, such books are now easily cheaply available either online or in the used-book marketplace. But most research libraries also curate non-commodity books and ephemera—rare and unique materials, usually with some particular relevance to the university community—and these remain as rare and unique as they ever were. It is now possible to expose and provide access to those materials (through digitization) in ways that were unheard of until recently. This means new and very exciting opportunities for libraries that are willing to shift focus.

As time goes on, new opportunities will arise that, if we are alert and ready to take risks, will make it increasingly possible to say with assurance “Yes, the academic library has a bright future.” This will require not only a willingness to take on new tasks and strategies, but also to let go of old ones. The latter is perhaps the greatest challenge for us. But I am convinced that our future depends on it. ●